

INTERACTIVE TOY AND METHODS FOR EXPLORING EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention relates to the field of educational, interactive toys. More particularly, the present invention relates to an interactive, educational toy for exploring emotions.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

10 The naming of emotion is a crucial stage of emotional development. Experts in the field of psychology indicate that an ability to name emotions and manage emotional experiences prepares an individual for the development of empathic social skills as well as cause and effect thinking. For instance, a child who "feels like hitting" has one outlet of expression in mind. In contrast, a child who "feels mad" can choose
15 more than one response to his or her emotional experience.

Developmental experts describe specific stages of emotional development and/or healing, moving from the experience of physical sensation into the experience of emotion and gradual discrimination of specific emotional experiences. Regions of the brain are stimulated during emotional experience, but identification is made when an
20 individual recognizes body and feeling sensations. Because of this physical feeling experience, it is important that individuals identify specific emotions through a combination of visual, kinesthetic, and linguistic means.

The naming of emotion is important throughout all of life and all areas of life. The ability to name emotion is thus important in a variety of environments.
25 Particularly with respect to children, some of these environments include early childhood learning centers, child assessment and screening centers, environments serving as a complement to parenting education and social skill building curricula, at Head Start centers, hospitals, elementary schools, foster care environments. Helping children to name emotion is helpful and important to parents, teachers, foster care providers, and
30 adoption workers.

Current educational and retail market toys frequently address the identification of emotion through recognition of facial expression, but unfortunately do not adequately address translation of emotion naming into physically felt experience. There also is a lack of toys available to provide a symbolic, kinesthetic approach to learning or to address the naming of emotion as a developmental stage. A variety of toys dealing with emotional experience, however, are commercially available. Western Psychological Services, Creative Therapy Store, offers a variety of toys that concern emotional experience. The Spring 2000 catalog from Thinking Publications (a distributor of products intended to enhance communication skills) offers only one emotion poster and one written book about feelings. Free Spirit Publishing offers the book "Hands are not for Hitting" by psychologist Martine Agassis. Lakeshore Learning Materials offers some posters and a game called "Feelings and Faces" that shows pictures of children with facial expressions representing emotion.

Notwithstanding these commercial sources of toys that relate to the emotional experience, there is still a great need for tools that help integrate and represent emotional experience. There is also still a great need for tools that address the naming stage in the development of emotional experience and that provide a visual, kinesthetic, and linguistic interaction.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention introduces an educational, interactive toy that symbolically represents emotions through visual, kinesthetic, and linguistic means. A child, or group of children, can be introduced to emotions through interactive play, which stimulates visual, kinesthetic, and linguistic learning. The toy helps an individual understand that the process of emotional experience occurs when individual emotions are named, verbalized, and expressed via a combination of one or more of action, language, facial expression, and/or voice tone. In preferred embodiments, this toy symbolically represents specific emotions and the process of feeling by representing how emotions move in and out of the heart, which is the experiential center of emotion. The toy invites children to name and express specific emotions.

In one aspect, the present invention relates to an interactive toy for exploring emotional experience. The toy includes a plurality of manipulatives, preferably in the form of playpieces. Each playpiece corresponds to a particular emotion, e.g., love, happy, sad, mad, and scared, respectively. The toy also includes a container having a storage chamber into which the playpieces may be independently stored or withdrawn during the course of play.

In another aspect, the present invention relates to a method of exploring emotional experience. The method includes providing the interactive, educational toy comprising a plurality of playpieces and a container as described herein. A user interacts with the toy, preferably visually, kinesthetically, and linguistically. A user may interact with the toy alone, but more desirably does so with another user and/or an adult who coaches and directs learning.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The above mentioned and other advantages of the present invention, and the manner of attaining them, will become more apparent and the invention itself will be better understood by reference to the following description of the embodiments of the invention taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, wherein:

Fig. 1 is a perspective view of a preferred toy embodiment of the present invention in which the container is a heart-shaped, pillow bag and five playpieces corresponding to love, happy, sad, mad, and scared are uniquely shaped and decorated bean bags.

Fig. 2 is a perspective view of the toy of Fig. 1 showing the pouch of the container into which playpieces may be stored or from which playpieces may be withdrawn.

Fig. 3 is a front view of the heart-shaped pillow bag shown in Fig. 1.

Fig. 4 shows the playpiece corresponding to love.

Figs. 5a and 5b show the front and back views, respectively, of the playpiece corresponding to happy.

Figs. 6a and 6b show front and back views, respectively, of the playpiece corresponding to mad.

Figs. 7a and 7b show the front and back views, respectively, of the playpiece corresponding to sad.

Figs. 8a and 8b show the front and back views, respectively, of the playpiece corresponding to scared.

Fig. 9 shows a perspective view of an alternative embodiment of a heart-shaped, pillow bag of the present invention.

Fig. 10 shows a young child and another person interacting with the toy of Fig. 1.

Fig. 11 shows two young children and another person interacting with the toy of Fig. 1.

Fig. 12 shows a young child pulling a playpiece/emotion from the heart-shaped pillow bag of Fig. 1.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PRESENTLY PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The embodiments of the present invention described below are not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise forms disclosed in the following detailed description. Rather the embodiments are chosen and described so that others skilled in the art may appreciate and understand the principles and practices of the present invention.

A preferred embodiment of an educational toy 10 of the present invention is shown in Figures 1 through 8b and 10-12. Toy 10 generally includes a plurality of manipulatives in the form of playpieces 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 as well as container 22. Each playpiece 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 corresponds to a particular emotion. For example, playpiece 12 corresponds to love, playpiece 14 corresponds to happy, playpiece 16 corresponds to sad, playpiece 18 corresponds to mad, and playpiece 20 corresponds to scared.

Of course, these five playpieces and their respective emotions are merely representative of the different playpieces that may be used in the practice of the present invention to explore emotional experience. As desired, toy 10 may include any one or more of these five particular kinds of playpieces and/or one or more playpieces corresponding to other emotions. In addition to the five emotions represented in toy 10,

other representative emotions include annoyed, anxious, bashful, bored, cautious, confident, confused, curious, determined, disappointed, embarrassed, enthusiastic, exhausted, frustrated, hopeful, interested, jealous, lonely, proud, relieved, satisfied, surprised, suspicious, thoughtful, and the like.

5 The playpieces 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 may have any of a variety of forms. For example, playpieces 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 of the present invention may be card-shaped, ball-shaped, block-shaped, stuffed-animal like, bean bag-like, in the form of a hand puppet, in the form of a finger puppet, etc. In the preferred embodiment illustrated in Figures 1 through 8b, each of playpieces 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 has a bean bag like
10 structure that is especially appealing to young children. For each of playpiece 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20, the bean bag structure includes one or more fabric panels enclosing a suitable stuffing material such as beans, beads, cotton, or the like. Any one or more of playpieces 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 may optionally incorporate an audio device that emits sounds, music, words, and/or the like either spontaneously and/or when triggered by a user.

15 Each playpiece 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 generally comprises one or more unique indicia indicative of the particular emotion, respectively. Such indicia include, for example, text information, texture, graphic information, color scheme, shape, or the like. Combinations of such indicia preferably are used to encourage visual, kinesthetic, and linguistic interaction with toy 10.

20 For example, as best seen in Figure 4, playpiece 12 corresponding to love is heart-shaped and multicolored. The heart shape is symbolic of the love emotion. The multi-colored, rainbow-like color scheme incorporates the colors used on the other playpieces 14, 16, 18, and 20 and symbolizes that love is a composite of all emotions. This playpiece is not limited to representations in this color scheme, but may also be
25 gold, pink, red, purple, combinations thereof, other coloring schemes, or the like.

 As shown best in Figs. 5a and 5b, playpiece 14 corresponding to happy is a sun-shaped bean bag. Fabric panel 30 includes graphic information in the form of a happy expression. Fabric panel 32 on the other side of playpiece 14 includes, for purposes of illustration, the text information "happy". Panels 32 and 34 preferably are
30 yellow, which symbolizes both happy and the sun.

As shown best in Figs. 6a and 6b, playpiece 18 corresponding to mad is a fire-shaped bean bag. Fabric panel 36 includes graphic information in the form of a mad expression. Fabric panel 38 on the other side of playpiece 18 includes, for purposes of illustration, the text information "mad". Fabric panels 36 and 38 preferably are red,
5 which symbolizes both being mad and the color of fire.

As shown best in Figs. 7a and 7b, playpiece 16 corresponding to sad is a tear-shaped bean bag. Fabric panel 40 includes graphic information in the form of a sad expression. Fabric panel 42 on the other side of playpiece 16 includes, for the purposes of illustration, the text information "sad". Panels 40 and 42 preferably are blue, which
10 symbolizes both being sad and the color of a tear drop.

As shown best in Figs. 8a and 8b, playpiece 20 is a ghost-shaped bean bag. Fabric panel 44 includes graphic information in the form of a scared expression. Fabric panel 46 on the other side of playpiece 20 includes, for purposes of illustration, the text information "scared". Fabric panels 44 and 46 preferably are green, although these
15 may preferably be black, white, and/or gray if a green playpiece corresponding to jealousy (not shown) were to be used.

Referring now primarily to Figs. 1-3 and 10-12, container 22 includes chamber 50 in which playpieces 12, 14, 16, 18, and/or 20 may be independently stored or withdrawn. Container 22 may be provided in a wide variety of forms such as a bag, a
20 pouch, a box, a backpack, or the like. Container 22 may be provided with an optional strap or handle (not shown) if desired. In the preferred embodiment shown, container 22 is a heart-shaped, stuffed panel, pillow bag. The preferred heart shape of container 22 facilitates the learning experience that emotions come from the body. For example, when a user stores a playpiece into container 22, the user is symbolically placing an emotion
25 into the heart. Likewise, when a user pulls a playpiece from container 22, the user is symbolically relying upon the heart as a source of emotion.

Container 22 may incorporate one or more functional or decorative features to make container 22 more appealing to a user. For example, container 22 as illustrated includes multicolored trim 52 around periphery 54. Trim 52 incorporates the
30 colors used on playpieces 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 to help visually connect the heart (i.e., container 22) to the various emotions (i.e., the playpieces). Graphic or textual

information may also be provided on the exterior of container 22. For purposes of illustration, the logo and text "Language of the Heart" appear on fabric panel 56. The fabric used to form container 22 for purposes of illustration is a silky smooth, purple fabric, but container 22 could be any color(s) or texture(s). For example, Figure 9 shows an alternative embodiment of a heart-shaped container 22' that has orange-colored, quilted fabric panels 58' and 60' and a multi-colored trim 52'.

Figure 10 shows child 70 interacting with toy 10 with the help of another person 72, who may be another child, an older sibling, a parent, a teacher, a therapist, or the like. Child 70 is holding playpiece 14 and is engaged in a lively discussion about emotion with person 72. The ability of child 70 to symbolically hold an emotion and discuss thoughts about the emotion makes the emotional experience more concrete and provides a visual, kinesthetic, linguistic, and interactive process for learning.

Advantageously, a concrete symbol for an otherwise fluid, sometimes overwhelming experience of emotion makes the experience more manageable and leads to a better understanding of cause and effect. For instance, a child can pick up a playpiece and describe situations that elicit the corresponding emotional experience. This correctly ties the experienced emotion to stimuli and allows a child or adult to plan for responsive actions.

Figure 11 shows instructor 80, child 82 and child 84 interacting with toy 10. This shows that toy 10 can be used with groups of children to explore emotional experience.

Figure 12 shows child 90 and another person 92 interacting with toy 10. In this case, child 90 is in the act of pulling a playpiece from container 22, which symbolizes pulling an emotion from the heart. This act helps child 90 to learn that emotions come from the body.

Other embodiments of this invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art upon consideration of this specification or from practice of the invention disclosed herein. Various omissions, modifications, and changes to the principles and embodiments described herein may be made by one skilled in the art without departing from the true scope and spirit of the invention which is indicated by the following claims.